

Ghost of JFK lingers; torch has yet to pass

Never has a ghost lived as John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives.

Never has a death seemed so impossible to so many. The moment of it stands frozen in time for millions. The moment aged the nation, and America has grown worse from the loss of its dreams. JFK stood as a symbol of our grandest myths. He will be remembered that way.

We, as people, as a collective nation of diverse histories, see ourselves in time in relation to the moment he left us, and the pain that haunts us, that seared the eyes of our mind, in a way, defines who we have become.

We carry the moment with us wherever we go, no matter what we might be doing when it comes back to us.

We pass along a folklore of stories of the moment he died, of how, at that one moment in time the President moved into our small worlds in a personal way which most of us would never have thought possible.

Everyone carries a version of the same story, the story that begins with the perspective of place, with the mundane, the impossibly small, the impossibly innocent, where we were, whether the sky was cloudy or clear, who was in the room with us, what we said, the way we stood, the clothes we wore, the insignificant object we held in our hand.

Since the moment we heard of the assassination, all we have had of the man is the moment, and we find ourselves there again. The media does not need to remind us.

Kennedy's life, his achievements, his words, his goals, have all disappeared in the cold shadow of the pictures we saw in Life magazine, the memories of the funeral procession, the flag draped coffin, the well trained horses, the unending burning of the torch on his grave, and our long journey homeward — of moving away from him, of leaving him for our own lives and our own private pain.

We are not likely to forget; we are not likely to forgive.

Much has changed since we left our moment in 1963, but as humans, we remain hurt by the lesson, we remain afraid and furious.

But we come not to praise Jack Kennedy. We come to bury him.

In Kennedy's time, we as a nation came alive with hope and love and dreams. A new era was born. Perhaps we needed his leadership to carry us through it. In any case, we lost something somewhere, if not with his death, then soon afterwards.

We desperately need new leaders to admire, new hopes, new dreams, new aspirations for a new world. We need to direct that compassion, that strength, that anger and humanity that we find in the infamous moment in our collective memory, and move toward a plan that will allow JFK to rest in peace.

During the past month, in this the 25th anniversary of his death, the ghost of Kennedy and the traumatic moment of his death has spread wings and has vividly entered our lives once again.

The truth behind his death is gone, unlikely to emerge. Let us praise all of our dead leaders, all of our friends, but look forward.

We hope we may create a present in which great leaders can live, but also an era in which men with great visions can be elected, whether or not they exhibit Kennedy's oratory skills, and whether or not they happen to have the same skin color or same religion into which we were born. We will never again have another JFK, and we may never again have another like him. We may never have dreams again like the dreams we had then.

Kennedy spoke of passing the torch to a new generation. But our generation has failed him. We have kept his ghost around because we have found no one to carry the torch. We are sorry, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Maybe you promised us too much.

We are sorry for what we have done with the moment you died. Perhaps we have wasted it, after all.



Forum

Constitutional democracy threatened

By Michael Colson

How does it happen that to be anti-communist we become undemocratic, as if we have to subvert our society to save it?

This is partly the answer: The powers claimed by presidents in national security have become the controlling wheel

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of government, driving everything else. Secrecy then makes it possible for the president to pose as the sole competent judge of what will best protect our security. Secrecy permits the White House to control what others know, and that's power. How many times have we heard a president say, "If you only knew what I know, you would understand why I'm doing what I'm doing"? But it's a self-defeating situation. Someone said, "Everything secret degenerates, even the administration of justice." So in the bunker of the White House, the men who serve the president put loyalty above analysis, and judgment yields to obedience. Just salute and follow orders.

It was career military men who managed the Iran-contra debacle under Reagan and North; Poindexter, McFarlane, Secord and Singlaub were all trained to fight wars, not run foreign policy. In war, the aim is absolute and simple: destroy

the enemy no matter what. They had little understanding of politics in Iran, Nicaragua, and most importantly, in Washington.

Our foreign policy has increasingly become a military policy. Ronald Reagan has doubled the number of military men on the staff of the National Security Council. What was created in 1947 as a civilian advisory group to the president has become a command post for covert operations run by the military. Far removed from public view and congressional oversight, they are accountable only to the one man they serve.

The framers of the Constitution feared a permanent state of war and secrecy (like what the NSC has provided under Reagan), with the commander-in-chief served by an elite corps who put the claims of the sovereign above the Constitution.

The issue here is not whether we should pursue a foreign policy that guards against the Soviet Union or our adversaries. Obviously, the Soviet Union and the many adversaries around the globe represent a threat to our interests around the world and to our values. However, the real problem here is the excessive American perception of that threat, and what it leads us to do. Because in addition to distorting our domestic priorities, to undermining our democratic civil liberties at home, in the end, arguably, it actually does damage our national security.

George Bush doesn't seem to realize what Michael Dukakis does about national security. National security for the United States is making the United States a good place to live for all people, where people want to be active, intelligent and involved citizens. For people at the top of government to say "This world is so complicated and so dangerous, just a few of us need to govern it and hold the secrets in and we will tell you what's good for you," — that is moving down the road

to dictatorship.

The Founding Fathers never intended for George Washington to be able to go to George III and say, "I don't like what Congress has done here; give me some money, I'll hire some mercenaries, and we'll call it American foreign policy." That would have been treason.

There's a great danger that in this country we would accept automatically things that are said to us in a doctrinaire fashion. In the case of Contra-gate, it was that we've got to be fighting communism, and so that can be the whitewash that Ronald Reagan and George Bush can use to cover up a multitude of sins. I think that's the strong evidence that that is what was going on, and we can't be fighting for democracy in Central America and seeing it shredded back here at home.

It doesn't have to be. The people who wrote this Constitution lived in a world more dangerous than ours. They were surrounded by territory controlled by hostile powers, on the edge of a vast wilderness. Yet they understood that even in perilous times, the strength of self-government was public debate and public consensus. To put aside these basic values out of fear, to imitate the foe in order to defeat him, is to shred the distinction that makes us different.

In the end, not only our values but our methods separate us from the enemies of freedom in the world. The decisions we make are inherent in the methods that produce them. An open society cannot survive a secret government like the one we have seen under Reagan and Bush. Constitutional democracy, you see, is no romantic notion. It's our defense against ourselves, the one foe who might defeat us.

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